

Council of Atlantic Premiers Press Release

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Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador

Premiers made a strong commitment to achieving a greater level of cooperation to address the priorities of Atlantic Canadians through joint work to improve provincial programs and services and through a renewed relationship with the federal government to address regional priorities.

Protecting and improving health care, strengthening equalization, cooperating for quality public services and taking action to grow Atlantic Canada's economy were the main topics of discussion at the 9th meeting of the Council of Atlantic Premiers, held today in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador. Premier Danny Williams hosted the meeting with Premier Bernard Lord, Premier John Hamm and Premier Pat Binns. The premiers discussed the need for further federal investments to ensure the sustainability of health care in the region. They also affirmed their commitment to pursue measures to increase economic competitiveness by building on the strengths of the region and ensuring that the interests of all Atlantic Canadians are fairly represented on issues of national importance.

Health

Premiers have a shared objective to ensure improved federal provincial fiscal arrangements which are adequate and sustainable.

While the February 2003 Health Arrangement funding, and the recent confirmation by Prime Minister Martin of the one-time supplement of \$2 billion, have provided a much needed infusion for health care, it is not sufficient to sustain existing programs and services and reform the health care system. It is considerably less than what provincial/territorial premiers have called for and what was recommended by the Romanow Commission. Because of the federal failure to provide appropriate health funding for 2004-05, Atlantic Canadians will see little progress in reducing wait times for surgery or for emergency room services and little improvement in funding for long-term wellness programs.

Despite the infusion, the federal funding share of provincial social program spending remains below historic levels and will decline again in the future without additional investments.

It is critical that the federal government increase its base funding in order to reform and improve health care and to address the long-term sustainability of the system.

Equalization

Premiers agreed that improvements to the equalization program are necessary to fulfill the constitutional commitment of ensuring provinces are able to provide comparable levels of public services at comparable levels of taxation. These improvements are an essential component of providing quality health care, education and other social services to our respective citizens.

Given the approaching deadline for the renewal of the program, the premiers called on the federal government to improve the program through the adoption of a ten-province standard and the restoration of comprehensive revenue coverage, which is essential to an effective Equalization Program. In light of recent estimates indicating a substantial federal surplus of at least \$5.2B, premiers also called on the federal government to act immediately to offset the clawbacks initiated by recent Census impacts.

Premiers directed their finance ministers to aggressively pursue these improvements to the program at the upcoming meeting of federal/provincial/territorial finance ministers on February 20th in Ottawa.

Improving Economic Competitiveness

Atlantic premiers considered new ways to enhance the economic and social well-being of Atlantic Canadians. The premiers were joined by Elizabeth Beale, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) who provided a summary of positive adjustments that have occurred in the region's economy and growth potential in key sectors and concerns related to the demographic realities and regional productivity rates.

The Atlantic premiers expressed their support for APEC's Atlantic Economic Summit to be held in September 2004 to discuss medium- and long-term economic policy directions for the region. The forum will recognize the 50th anniversary of the founding of APEC and will bring together key stakeholders in the public and private sector with decision-makers at the regional and national level.

Supporting Our Food Industry

Premiers have agreed to strike an Atlantic Canada Action Team, consisting of representatives of government and the appropriate food industries from the four Atlantic provinces. The mandate of the action team is to promptly consider and recommend policies to promote sales of beef and other Atlantic food products, in a manner consistent with existing internal trade agreements.

Individual governments and industry associations are proceeding with branding, promotional and marketing initiatives to encourage increased consumption of Atlantic products.

Insurance Harmonization

The availability of affordable insurance products for Atlantic Canadians remains a common priority for Atlantic governments. The Atlantic departments responsible for insurance were directed to continue work on common insurance legislation for products other than automobile insurance. The premiers noted that work is on-going to investigate the merits of various automobile insurance regimes, and reaffirmed their joint commitment to pursue harmonization where possible.

Working Together for Atlantic Canada

The premiers released the second year report of their two-year action plan, adopted in November 2001. Working Together for Atlantic Canada: Report on Year Two highlights further accomplishments of the Council of Atlantic Premiers in improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of public services and strengthening the region's economic competitiveness. Progress has been achieved in addressing literacy, services to students with exceptionalities, skills development, joint health initiatives, innovation, and procurement.

Premiers noted that a meeting of the Atlantic ministers of energy will be held in Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia on February 15 and 16 and encourage their ministers to look at opportunities for greater regional cooperation on energy policy.

Premiers directed their officials to develop a plan for further harmonization of legislation, policies and programs for the region.

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